

It was a dead swan. Its body lay contorted on the beach like an abandoned lover. I looked at the bird for a long time. . . .

I knelt beside the bird, took off my deer-skin gloves, and began smoothing feathers. Its body was still limp—the swan had not been dead long. I lifted both wings out from under its belly and spread them on the sand. Untangling the long neck which was wrapped around itself was more difficult, but finally I was able to straighten it, resting the swan's chin flat against the shore.

The small dark eyes had sunk behind the yellow lores. It was a whistling swan. I looked for two black stones, found them, and placed them over the eyes like coins. They held. And, using my own saliva as my mother and grandmother had done to wash my face, I washed the swan's black bill and feet until they shone like patent leather.

I have no idea of the amount of time that passed in the preparation of the swan. What I remember most is lying next to its body and imagining the great white bird in flight. (p. 121)

"Es druckten deine lieben Hände / Mir die getreuen Augen zu." Maureen Ursenbach Beecher quotes these words to Mary Bradford upon reading Bradford's touching essay, "The Veil," on the tender oblations of ritual dressing of her mother's body. The German lines express the idea that "one might go in peace if it were the loved one's loving hands which pressed the eyelids shut" (Bradford, 1987, 81).

In the mortuary, Terry does not shrink from serving her mother's body, with a tenderness similar to that prefigured in her service to the dead swan. Only here she rages against violation of the face she loves: "Mother's body, now a carapace, naked, cold, and stiff, on a stainless steel table. Her face had been painted orange. I asked him to remove the makeup" (p. 235). He doesn't. She does.

But of all the themes contained in this rich book—themes of solitude, rage, the Church providing both solace and dismay, both comforting and disturbing rituals, the land and its unnatural desecration, death and its process, the power of words—the

theme that for me is strongest is that of the mother/daughter relationship. This is the one natural fact amidst all that is unnatural and wrong with the world. It is the constant. The book is, after all, dedicated to Terry's mother. This family revolves about that mother/daughter center, and with the generational and genetic circle come all the natural and simple rituals. Racked with nausea and diminished by weakness, Diane performs a heroic gesture in preparing the family's traditional Christmas brunch. Her refinement and exquisite good taste are unmarred. That is ritual. That is Diane saying, we are family, no matter what, and we will sit down together, and we will celebrate in the midst of sorrow, and we will love each other in the fragility of a traditional meal.

The family, and especially the mother/daughter rituals, are what bring my good and rightful tears of recognition. The words are in place, and the simple acts they describe are true. Why would I cry over a shopping trip to Nordstrom's—over Diane's slim form sheathed in a red holiday dress—Terry with her in the dressing room to approve and to observe her beauty. These are mother/daughter rhythms. I wept my way through these passages—these verbal embraces of mother and child, these death lullabies:

What is it about the relationship of a mother that can heal or hurt us? Her womb is the first landscape we inhabit. . . . Our maternal environment is perfectly safe—dark, warm, and wet. It is a residency inside the Feminine. (p. 50)

Mother and I are in Wyoming. . . . She gave me my birth story. . . . "I don't ever remember being so happy, Terry. Having a child completed something for me. I can't explain it. It's something you feel as a woman connected to other women." (p. 51)

Suffering shows us what we are attached to—perhaps the umbilical cord between Mother and me has never been cut. . . . (p. 53)

"Terry, I need you to help me through my death." (p. 156)

Dawn to dusk. I have spent the entire day with Mother. Lying next to her. Rubbing her back. Holding her fevered hand